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SUBJECT: 'KHAMENEI: NOW MORE THAN EVER' SAYS IRAN'S EXPERTS ASSEMBLY

CLASSIFIED BY: Alan Eyre, Director, DOS, IRPO; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY. The February 23-24 biannual meeting of the Assembly of Experts ended without incident, and despite the pre-meeting agitations of pro-Ahmadinejad elements, without any appreciable diminution of the political standing of its head, former President Hashemi Rafsanjani. The dominant theme of the two-day meeting was support for the Supreme Leader, confirming that for the time being, as a body the AoE remains publically fully behind Khamenei. It also indicates that while there is a significant and influential anti-Rafsanjani/pro-Ahmadinejad minority within the AoE, it is currently incapable of inflicting significant political damage on AoE President Rafsanjani. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (C) On February 23-24 Iran's Assembly of Experts (AoE), charged with electing, supervising and if necessary removing the Supreme Leader, had its second biannual meeting since the tumultuous June 12 Presidential elections. This 86-member body, headed by composed exclusively of popularly elected senior clerics, is head by former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, and its two meetings since the election have been studied as an indication of his political standing. Noticeably absent in this meeting was Rafsanjani arch-nemesis Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, whose stayed away but who sent his son to take his seat.

¶13. (U) In the lead-up to this latest AoE meeting elements associated with President Ahmadinejad's political faction increased their anti-Rafsanjani public rhetoric. Pro-Ahmadinejad press and politicians issued calls that per Khamenei guidance Rafsanjani must 'clarify his position,' 'i.e. express fealty to the Supreme Leader and explicitly condemn the Green Movement and its leaders Khatami, Mousavi and Karrubi. In this vein:

- the pro-Ahmadinejad 'Vatan-e Emruz' newspaper wrote of the possibility of removing Rafsanjani as AoE head (despite the fact that leadership elections were not scheduled);

- an unofficial group in Qom called 'Popular Staff for Discernment Meetings' published statements in some Qom seminaries seeking Rafsanjani's removal, implying it was Khamenei's wishes;

- a Kayhan Editorial by Hossein Shariatmadari on Feb 20 accused Rafsanjani of cooperating with Hassan Ruhani and Mohsen Rezai in seeking to reform the election law to weaken the Guardian Council,

in order to 'open the path of the influence of the enemy.'

- in recently released remarks, hardline conservative cleric Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi said that "after Ashura (December 27 demonstrations) ... there were no doubts remaining" about Rafsanjani's sympathies with the 'insurrectionists.'

RAF SPEECH: SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

¶4. (U) Rafsanjani's opening AoE speech on February 23 was a perfunctory tour d'horizon, filled with the usual talking points on regional and domestic issues, to include praising the popular turnout on February 11, which "showed the wisdom of the Iranian people." In the non-boilerplate part of his speech, picked up by reformist media, he said, "during the interval between the two meetings of the Assembly of Experts [September 2009-March 2010], some distressing incidents happened in the country that were unprecedented [i.e. demonstrations on November 4, December 7 and December 27]. These incidents led to disputes and probably created grudges... the families of both protesters and [security] forces were hurt too, which is regrettable and requires investigation."

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¶5. (C) Much of both this speech and his subsequent February 24 speech at the grave of Grand Ayatollah Khomeini (another AoE meeting ritual) was filled with references to the popular nature of the Islamic Revolution, with Rafsanjani saying that it was the Iranian people who brought about the Revolution and have sustained it, a not-to-subtle warning about the dangers of losing popular support. Rafsanjani in this latter speech also referred to his own long Revolutionary credentials while disparaging "those people who didn't have anything to say during the time of struggle," (and who now) are professing to be champions of the Revolution, an implicit reference to a wide range of Rafsanjani's recent enemies, to include Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi.

¶6. (C) Rafsanjani's AoE speeches were of course rife with the requisite expressions of fealty to the Supreme Leader, with his saying at one point that "I don't know anyone better than the Leader to be the basis of unity." However in his comments he also made a subtle distinction between the person and the position itself, calling the latter 'the most important capital from the Islamic Revolution.' He also implied that Khamenei should remove himself from partisan battles, at one point praising Khamenei's capabilities and familiarity with religious, scientific, economic, management, and military matters, while adding "we must not allow ourselves to abuse such an important resource for trivial matters."

¶7. (C) Perhaps in response for demands for clarification, Rafsanjani spoke of the need to preserve the 'border between those faithful to the Revolution and those foundation-breakers who have a problem with the Constitution and the Supreme Leader.' However, this statement, and Rafsanjani's protestations of loyalty to the Supreme Leader, were insufficient for his detractors within the AoE, with some of the 16 speakers allotted 15 minutes for comments voicing dissatisfaction with his stance. For example, Mazandaran province representative Hojjatoleslam Moallemi complained that considering his position Rafsanjani should have 'spoken more clearly' and 'taken a position,' while Golestan Province Representative Hojjatoleslami Shahroudi requested that Rafsanjani 'prove for all' his devotion to the Supreme Leader by taking a clear and transparent position.

¶18. (C) As per custom, select government officials were summoned to the AoE to brief on their portfolios. This time both Foreign Minister Mottaki and IRGC Commander Jaafari gave reports, the former on Iran's foreign affairs and the latter on domestic security. The latter's reported comments were interesting insofar as he included 'technocrats' [possibly a reference to Rafsanjani and his supporters] along with "anti-revolutionaries and revisionists" as being among those opposing the Revolution and the Velayat-e Faqih (i.e. Supreme Leader Khamenei).

¶19. (C) The two-day AoE session also featured the reading of the monthly report of its Article 111 Commission, which meets monthly to monitor the performance of the Supreme Leader in light of his Constitutional duties. The Committee's fawning findings were perhaps best summarized in its gushing statement that 'as we progress forward, the Leader's essential qualities shine brighter and brighter, especially his wisdom and management.'

FINAL AOE STATEMENT: 'KHAMENEI-FEST'

¶10. (C) The AoE's final statement was likewise a paean to the Supreme Leader and an exhortation to all to continue to follow his guidance. It said (inter alia):

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- It is essential to bring about quiet and unity by following the guidance of the Supreme Leader

- the post-election events, although inflicting significant material and spiritual damage, was also a blessing as it helped identify impurities and to separate the forces of good and evil, and to test Iran's people and elites. The results of this historic trial showed the people's wisdom and also unfortunately also the forlorn nature of some elites.

- The 'Revolutionary patience' of the people ended on December 30 [the day of the pro-government demonstration]. But even though "the insurrection is over," the people's responsibilities, and the need to make one's positions clear and to follow the Supreme Leader, has not ended. Reflection on what had transpired would convince any reasonable person of the need for full support the position of the Supreme Leader.

- Iran's intelligence and security forces would continue to deal 'decisively' with any type of suspicious or incendiary acts.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Popular participation in AoE elections is minimal by Iranian standards, and the Guardian Council has been especially virulent in its ideological screening for candidates for this body. This, plus the natural conservative nature of Iran's clerical class, means that the AoE as a whole is the most inertial of Iranian institutions. This AoE meeting confirms that, despite Rafsanjani's leadership, as a body the AoE remains publically fully behind the Supreme Leader. It also indicates that while there is a significant and influential anti-Rafsanjani/pro-Ahmadinejad minority within the AoE, it is currently incapable of inflicting significant political damage on AoE President Rafsanjani. END COMMENT.

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